

COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF ARISTIDES DE SOUSA MENDES, HUMANITARIAN AND WORLD WAR II HERO

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, November 16, 2004

Mr. LANTOS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of World War II hero, Aristides de Sousa Mendes. Mr. Sousa Mendes, the defamed Consul General of Portugal to Bordeaux, France, spared more than 30,000 lives from the perils of Hitler's Nazi regime.

In May of 1940, the Nazis broke through French defense's in Sedan and Hitler's blitzkrieg exploded over the French borders. In a matter of days, a deluge of refugees from Paris, Warsaw, Berlin and Riga headed towards Southern France hoping to flee to neutral Portugal or Spain via Bordeaux. Using pushcarts, trucks, wagons and any other ramshackle mode of transportation, thousands of Jewish refugees and others of "ill-defined nationality," according to the Nazis, stormed the city of Bordeaux in hopes of obtaining the transit visa needed to exit France. Homeless and laden with their salvaged belongings, men, women and children slept in the streets and on the park benches of Bordeaux. The Jewish refugees sought out the Bordeaux synagogue in seek of shelter and care.

Kindled by Nazi propaganda, rampant anti-Semitism plagued Bordeaux as the flood of Jewish refugees spread through the streets. The situation for the thousands of refugees became more desperate day by day. The wealthier refugees managed to book sea passage and left Europe for safer shores. The remaining helpless masses became increasingly despairing as Spanish General Franco, indebted to Hitler, was determined not to allow refugees to infiltrate the Spanish borders. Unless refugees held a Portuguese issued transit visa on their person, they were unable to flee to Portugal via Spain.

In November of 1939, Portuguese Premier Antonio de Oliveira Salazar issued a directive, which forbade his diplomats in Europe from granting transit visas to categories of people without explicit permission from Lisbon. Included in these categories were "Jews expelled from the countries of their nationality or those from whence they issue", "stateless persons," and "all those who cannot safely return to the countries from whence they came." Subsequently, on May 17, 1940, days after the Nazis invaded France; Salazar declared that under no circumstances was any visa to be granted unless previously authorized by Lisbon, and only on a case-by-case basis.

Serving as the Portuguese Consul-General, Aristides de Sousa Mendes witnessed the clamoring throngs of refugees at the gates of the Portuguese Consulate in Bordeaux. Disregarding the Premier, Sousa Mendes declared, "I will grant a visa to whoever needs it, whether they can afford it or not. I will act in accordance to what my Christian conscience tells me."

Indiscriminately, Sousa Mendes distributed transit visas in Bordeaux, Bayonne and Hendaye near the Franco-Spanish border. Sousa Mendes issued 30,000 transit visas and

opened up a refugee escape route assumed to have saved the lives of over one million World War II refugees. Ten thousand of these refugees were Jews certain to have perished at the hands of the Nazis in extermination camps. The other 20,000 visas appeared in the passports of artists, writers, intellectuals, journalists, priests, nuns and others whose beliefs did not embody those of the fascist regime of Hitler's Nazi empire.

Sousa Mendes became known as the "Angel of Bordeaux." He and his beloved wife Angelina welcomed refugees into their own home. The halls, chambers and grounds of the Portuguese Consulate were filled with hungry, exhausted and terrorized individuals awaiting visas that promised them life.

By June 17, 1940, an arbitrary system of gathering stacks and stacks of passports, stamping them with the coveted visas, and redistributing the documents without fee, record or count became Sousa Mendes' unceasing mission.

As conditions worsened in France, more and more refugees fled to the South of France in hopes of fleeing to Portugal. On June 19, 1940, Sousa Mendes left his family in Bordeaux to assist more refugees in the Franco-Spanish border city of Bayonne. Overtaking the Consul General in Bayonne, he began to distribute exit visas to the thousands lined up all around the Consulate. In Bayonne, a telegram was sent to Lisbon from the actual Bayonne Consul General, Mr. Machado, informing Salazar of Sousa Mendes' activities.

Two telegrams were sent to Sousa Mendes. One telegram demanded that Sousa Mendes cease his visa production and the second informed Sousa Mendes of his dismissal. Neither telegram was received, as Sousa Mendes had already moved to the border city Hendaye, to continue distribution. However, on June 24, 1940, he returned to Bordeaux and received the telegram with orders to leave France. Sousa Mendes disregarded the notice and thought of a method to keep the trapped refugees out of concentration camps: he began to issue Portuguese passports. Again he was rebuked by Lisbon and ordered to depart from France.

Due to the group of prestigious individuals Sousa-Mendes saved, including Otto Habsburg, members of the Rothschilds family and members of the Belgian cabinet, Premier Salazar initially acknowledged the good press resulting from Sousa-Mendes' disobedience. Regardless, shortly thereafter, Salazar shunned Sousa Mendes, rendering this hero a disgraced, persona non grata.

Closely monitored by Portuguese authorities, Sousa Mendes and his family were condemned to humiliation, destitution and infamy. Merely weeks before the end of the war, Sousa Mendes suffered a stroke and was left paralyzed. Eight years later his wife, Angelina, who served with Sousa Mendes tirelessly throughout the insanity of their days in Bordeaux issuing exit visas and passports, suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in 1948 and perished six months later.

On April 3, 1954, Aristides de Sousa Mendes died at the Franciscan Hospital of the Tertiary Order in Lisbon. The Portuguese government never pardoned him while he still lived. Finally, in 1987, President Mario Soares granted Sousa Mendes the Portuguese Order of Freedom and publicly apologized to his surviving family for the injustices their family endured.

Mr. Speaker, as you know my wife Annette and I were saved from death by Raoul Wallenberg. Aristides de Sousa Mendes action's were equally valiant, as Ben Macintyre said, "Like Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews from Auschwitz in 1944 and 1945 by issuing them with diplomatic documents, de Sousa Mendes risked his life and destroyed his career by following his conscience."

Despite Sousa Mendes' noble sacrifice, the public at large is not aware of the courage and bravery of this man. However, one organization that does honor this man's life, and recognizes the importance of acknowledging the power of one to make a difference, is the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation.

In recognition of those who strive to emulate the courageous and selfless acts of Wallenberg and de Sousa Mendes, the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation minted a commemorative Aristides de Sousa Mendes medal. This Medal is presented yearly to individuals from all walks of life whose lives exhibit an unwavering commitment to humanitarian values, and a willingness to risk one's own life for fellow human beings, as Wallenberg and Sousa Mendes did in World War II.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of this great humanitarian's death. It is imperative to me and my wife, that this unsung hero's legacy is recognized and celebrated. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to pay tribute to Mr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE 23RD STREET ASSOCIATION ON THE OCCASION OF ITS ANNUAL AWARD LUNCHEON

HON. CAROLYN B. MALONEY

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mrs. MALONEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize the achievements of the 23rd Street Association, its president, Sharon L. Ullman and the Association's 2004 honoree, North Fork Bank, on the occasion of the Association's 75th anniversary celebration and award luncheon. The 23rd Street Association is an outstanding organization that addresses community concerns and fosters a wholesome environment for those who live and work between 18th and 28th Streets in Manhattan.

The 23rd Street Association was formed in 1929 by 22 local businesspeople to improve environmental conditions and promote economic development in Manhattan. Today, the Association addresses a broad range of citizen complaints and concerns by working closely with local community boards as well as city, state and federal government agencies. The Association is also actively involved with local police precincts to improve area security and prevent drug sales, theft and other crimes. Whether purchasing and planting over 200 trees from the City Parks Department or working with the New York Department of Transportation to improve traffic conditions, the Association's commitment to community service has been exceptional.

One of the Association's most notable achievements is its Campaign for the New Madison Square Park, which raised more than